

Building Connections: Assessment and Evaluation Revisited

Ann Hatherly • Carmel Richardson

Introduction

In this chapter, we take the view that early childhood education is currently well placed to lead the way in curriculum and pedagogy that reflects twenty-first century views of knowledge and ways of knowing. Part of this leadership vision resides in finding assessment and evaluation processes which pay greater attention to the relationships that facilitate learning, not only learning for children but also for the adults who work with them. It also resides in first defining and then assessing the kinds of knowledge, skills and dispositions that today's children will need to become confident, competent and socially responsible adults. The power of assessment and evaluation to influence learning and teaching is often under-acknowledged, such are the daily demands of simply getting these requirements done. However, as Johnson and Kress (2003) point out, we can only transform curriculum and pedagogy by also transforming the way we assess learning. It is our contention that a failure to take a pro-active leadership role in these matters will continue to leave the sector vulnerable to the implementation of well marketed, commercial, assessment packages and orthodox methods borrowed from other educational sectors where they are frequently discredited for their propensity to narrow and trivialise learning.

Drawing on examples from Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australian early childhood contexts, we wish to illustrate ways in which the kind of leadership that we are advocating in early childhood assessment is

already emerging, inspired and guided by sociocultural theory. One of the benefits of a jointly authored chapter is that it presents the opportunity to bring to light different ways in which a sociocultural perspective can be interpreted. The case studies we discuss in this chapter illustrate this. While one is drawn from Aotearoa/New Zealand practice and the other from Australian practice, it is not our intention to position them as exclusively aligned with one or other country. These days, globalisation ensures that good ideas travel and early childhood assessment thinking is no exception. Later in the chapter, the implications for evaluation and program planning of engaging a sociocultural perspective are considered. We also mention some of the issues — both pedagogical and political — that will need attention by policy-makers and teachers as these new approaches become more established within the early childhood community.

Assessment and evaluation

The terms 'assessment' and 'evaluation' tend to be frequently used but rarely defined, perhaps because at the level of centre practice they can be difficult to separate. Traditionally, assessment has referred to the process of gathering and interpreting information on children's learning while evaluation describes the way of using this information to form a judgment about the effectiveness of the curriculum and the need for change. Mobley and Teets (1992, p. 186) quote Hilton Smith at a conference in 1990, 'Assessment strategies tell you "what is", documentation gives you proof of "what is" and evaluation tells you "what is" in light of what should be'. In these definitions, the concepts are presented as a relatively straightforward, two-step procedure, a view still commonly espoused today in much of the political and policy rhetoric surrounding assessment and evaluation. Assessment has also been analysed and defined in terms of purpose with the distinction being made between summative assessment or 'assessment for accountability' (often referred to as 'assessment of learning'), and formative assessment or 'assessment for learning' (Torrance, 1993). In the first of these, *proving learning* — particularly to outside agencies — is the main focus. In the second, the emphasis is on *improving learning* for the learners themselves by engaging and motivating them through reciprocal interaction and feedback. Here, the notion of change to increase effectiveness is more akin to a responsiveness — often but not always the teacher's — that is embedded in the assessment process itself.

It has often been observed that the high stakes attached to 'proving' learning mean that assessment practices which do this well — the more quantifiable approaches — tend to eclipse, in the minds and practices of

teachers, those which serve the purpose of 'improving' learning by encouraging higher-order thinking (James & Gipps, 1998). However, like these authors, we would argue that in any setting in which education is the prime purpose, when assessment for learning is successfully taken care of then assessment for accountability will take care of itself and teachers will indeed be able to prove learning has occurred. For this reason, our interest in this chapter is on discussing assessment frameworks and approaches that are formative rather than summative in their intent. A recent resource published in Aotearoa/New Zealand, *Kei Tua o te Pae, Assessment for Learning: Early Childhood Exemplars* (Ministry of Education, 2004) draws on Cowie's (2000) definition of formative assessment as being 'noticing, recognising and responding'. The same resource talks about assessments (especially when they are documented) 'that make visible learning that is valued so that the learning community (children, families, whānau, teachers and others) can foster ongoing and diverse learning pathways' (Book 1, p. 3). These definitions highlight how at the level of day-to-day practice, assessment and evaluation become intertwined as the key participants in the process move from noticing to responding and back again.

While early childhood teachers have always included child observation in their repertoire of 'what a teacher does', it is only in the last 15 or so years that documented assessment, and to a lesser extent evaluation, has become a serious focus of study and debate within the early childhood education sector in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand. This has been a move prompted on the one hand by educational interests (the desire to see children benefit from their early childhood experience) and on the other by economic drivers (the need to ensure that taxpayers' spending on early childhood is value for money). Being a relative newcomer to the measurement industry, which now seems to dominate education, has many advantages. For example, unlike schools, early childhood is not beholden to a long tradition of assessment thinking and methods dating back to the days of the industrial revolution when knowledge was understood to be certain, static, universal and therefore capable of frequent measurement. While traditional school assessment practices such as checklists and baseline assessments have continued to 'push down' on the early childhood sector, it is important to see them for what they are: artefacts borrowed from another time and place. Even within the literature on school assessment, the relevance of these approaches is now being questioned on the grounds that the type of knowledge — and therefore assessment — needed for the complexity of tomorrow's world is much less certain and more amorphous than that of the past

(Delandshere, 2001; Wells, 2001; Claxton, 1999). Despite this, traditional views of knowledge have become 'fossilised' in many current school assessment practices, including those that have been rather ubiquitously and uncritically adopted by early childhood educators. As Broadfoot (2001, p. 109) puts it, 'We cling to the familiar, like a much-loved old garment, even when, sometimes, it is long past its best and ought to have been discarded long ago.'

Reframing practice

This 'much-loved old garment' — one which most of us know from our own schooling — has largely been framed by an understanding of childhood development firmly based within the scientific model espoused by developmental psychologists. This familiar perspective focuses on the lone child who is understood to pass through well-defined and demarcated ages and stages of development that are assumed to be measurable and universal in nature. This scientific framework of thinking about child development has demanded an equally 'scientific' approach be adopted by those working with young children in regard to the collection of observational data for assessment. In other words, teachers have been asked to stand back and act as 'objective' observers and collectors of information about individual children (Fleer, 2002, 2003). They have been trained to become 'invisible' agents, denying their own presence or influence on the interaction being observed and how their presence may or may not impact on the outcome of the individual child's performance of the task at hand. Information thus 'objectively' collected, often in situations in which the child is unsupported, is then broken down into discrete and compartmentalised domains of learning and recorded, most often as ticks on a developmental checklist. In effect, this has proven to be a fragmented approach to assessment. It is assessment that reduces complex learning processes into small measurable 'chunks' that are assumed to be easily recordable. It is a strategy that ignores the rich interplay of supportive interactions that stimulate and enable learning and it often leaves teachers focusing on children's 'weaknesses', that is, those skills they have not yet acquired, rather than focusing on their more revealing interests and strengths.

One only has to think back to one's own educational experiences and the way in which external exams determined curriculum content to know that what is assessed gets taught. It is no different in early childhood education where, for example, school entry demands for certain literacy, numeracy and self-help skills often become the 'bread and butter' of

early childhood programs. It is important therefore that we choose carefully what to assess, making sure that it reflects what is worth learning both for the present and for the future. Society's expectations of education are higher than they have ever been, but the agendas behind these are more complex than they might first appear. Claxton and Carr (2002) and Wells (2001) are amongst the many writers who have pointed out that the rapid change brought about by the increase in communication technology and globalisation calls for a view of knowledge that is very different from the one which most teachers have been exposed to in their own education and which is still promulgated through policies and practices which aim to improve standards and accountability.

Sociocultural perspectives on learning and assessment

Where certainty and facts were once synonymous with 'being knowledgeable', now it is attitudes and dispositions that many in both business and education see as the important prerequisites for effective participation in a diverse and changing world. Ask any group of parents or teachers what attributes the children of today will need as adults to live socially responsible and fulfilling lives and the answers will be similar. They are likely to include: motivation; a capacity for respect and tolerance; an ability to collaborate with others; an inclination for risk-taking, inquiry and problem solving. As Wells (2001, p. 175) points out, this is not the kind of knowledge that can be 'handed over as if it were the intellectual equivalent of a bag of groceries to be delivered' (and we would add here, with regard to assessment, to be put through to a stocktake). These are attributes which rely as much on the hard-to-measure emotional, social and aesthetic qualities as they do on cognitive skills. They are also the sort of attributes that can only be assessed and evaluated with any validity when children have opportunities to be actively engaged in personally significant experiences and relationships. Becoming a competent collaborator with others, for example, does not lend itself to decontextualised strategies such as work sheets and rote learning.

This change in perspective and understanding about what is considered to be significant learning and how it can be assessed is directly related to concepts about learning itself. An increased awareness of the socially constructed and culturally situated nature of learning is integral to this perspective. Moving away from a strong focus on the individual learner to recognition of the importance of what adults and peers model to children and how children respond to adult and peer mediation is significant. This change in focus can be directly attributed to the work of Lev Vygotsky (see Wertsch, 1985).

Vygotsky spoke about two interrelated concepts for explaining interactions and progression in learning: inter-psychological and intra-psychological functioning. Inter-psychological functioning describes the context in which the child participates in supported ways in the cultural activities of his or her community. Intra-psychological functioning follows this guided participation in community activities and describes the internalisation of learning within the individual. In other words, learning occurs first in interaction with others. This movement from joint to independent participation is made possible only within the context of relationships that support learning and in situations where the child sees relevance in the concepts being modelled. This in itself implies that learning occurs in those situations when children are engaged in meaningful occupation with more capable and significant others in supportive learning communities.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of development placed relationships, interactions and the culture of young children as central to learning. Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development focuses on learning occurring as children are supported to work on concepts or skills beyond their current level of ability. They are enabled to do this because of the purposeful and deliberate assistance of another more capable than themselves. If we change our assessment lens to incorporate this view then we begin to focus on children's potential capabilities as they interact with others rather than being narrowly focused on a child's current and unsupported development.

Rogoff (1998, p. 690) elaborates further on this idea of dynamic learning processes when she writes: '... cognitive development [must be seen] as a process, as people move through understanding rather than to understanding'. Consequently, assessment practices that follow a sociocultural perspective are framed to map the transformation of understanding and not some end point. It is mapping this 'throughness' in understanding that becomes a hallmark of sociocultural assessment. Learning moves from being seen and understood as the static moment when a skill is finally mastered to the active and dynamic process of changing participation in valued community activities that lead to this accomplishment. This demands that assessment include the 'fluid nature' of the learning sequence — both the context and the activities recorded over a sustained period of time. It also enables recognition that active learning is occurring as new concepts are modelled, jointly undertaken and ultimately independently mastered. Within a sociocultural perspective, all stages of the learning process are equally valued.